

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
17 April 2016

Scriptures readings:

Acts 9:36-43 Psalm 23 Revelation 7:9-17 John 10:22-30

Today in the life of the Church this Sunday is referred to as Good Shepherd Sunday. Can you guess why? We've used the 23rd Psalm twice which is really lovely. It's nice to use those hymn paraphrases. Did you memorize the 23rd Psalm as a child? I certainly did. Don't ask me to do it now! And of course we learned it in King James English which is the way God wrote it. *[laughter]* Ah, you satisfy my hope that we're sophisticated beyond that.

It's worth pausing to think about the imagery of what it means to believe, have and call the Jesus we believe in a good shepherd. And how a lot of us urban people who never have contact with livestock and farming construe what a shepherd is is probably heavily influenced by pictures that we've seen of the good shepherd. You certainly know how I feel about the late 19th and early 20th century depictions of Jesus the good shepherd in stained glass windows in churches all across the country. You know the one I mean, don't you? The bearded lady in a freshly dry-cleaned bathrobe with three poodles just out of the poodle parlor. *[laughter]* Jesus not wearing shoes, no dirty toenails, no dirty fingernails, and one of the poodles is being held in front of him and the other two are heeling on either side, very well behaved, very clean and looking more like domesticated animals than sheep.

When James and I bought our house in Newfoundland in 1986 we had a neighbor in those early years called "Ben" who was an old ram. If you didn't see Ben, you smelled him, and if you did see him he probably disregarded the fence between you and would come over and visit. He entered the vegetable gardens. He didn't obey. And I can tell you this: One thing that Ben was not - although possibly charming - he was not clean. There are nether parts on a sheep that are unbelievable. *[laughter]* You may or may not know this, but in the Vatican collection is what is believed to be one of the earliest depictions - a sculpture - of Jesus as the good shepherd from the first half of the 4th century, the early 300s. That picture is here and it doesn't at all look like a bearded lady in a bathrobe or with three poodles. It looks like a young man - too young to have a beard - in a tunic that is above his knees, with sandals on, a shoulder bag, and a lamb whose wool looks strangely like the hair of the shepherd who's carrying him.

We just read in the liturgy today about the Lamb who is our shepherd. We sing the *Agnus Dei* every Sunday at Mass. *O Christ, thou Lamb of God*. I don't think that's a mistake. I think that's intentional but it's a very, very different image of what a shepherd in the 4th century was understood to look like as opposed to this syrupy, 19th century, cleaned-up, pressed and primed vision of the good shepherd that has been depicted in churches through most of my life and yours, I suppose, as well. Why is that a problem? Well, shepherding is a dirty business. My neighbors who were Moravians, Happy and Melita Stevens - some of you knew them - in spring when lambing season came, always had in their kitchen a cardboard box with a goat or a lamb in it. They took these critters into their home to bottle feed them and nurse them and encourage them. Happy's fingernails were never clean. James and I did their laundry in their later years, and a farmer's clothes and a shepherd's clothes are never clean. They don't come from the dry cleaners.

I've told you this before. In the church where I grew up in Allentown there was an acre-sized window with this 19th century picture of the bearded lady that needed to be repaired so it was replaced and a new window put in with the same subject matter but a very different image, looking more like the one which is being passed around - a young shepherd, too young to have a beard, a young shepherd whose tunic is ripped and repaired, a young shepherd wearing sandals, a young shepherd with - as with the Vatican image - a lamb over his shoulders.

When I encountered Ben and Ben's very unsanitary nether parts I knew one thing: I would never put Ben over my shoulders. *[laughter]* But that's the important piece, you see. That's the important piece because

we make choices about how we see our God, and if our God has just stepped out of the bandbox and has three poodles with her, we have an image of a God who isn't at work, a God who is clean instead of soiled, a God who is not vigorous instead of youthful, a God who has all around him tamed and primped and permanented and powdered and pretty as opposed to a working shepherd who is dirty by fishing out filthy, dumb, ignorant animals who are caught under thorn bushes out of which they cannot extract themselves and who cannot - because they are so dumb - cannot find their own food and water.

I believe it was Aunt Gertie who told me after she went to the Holy Land that it was understood there that only one goat was needed to lead an entire flock of sheep. Sheep are so dumb that a goat will lead them to pasture and to water. And it only takes one goat. So when the business of separating the sheep from the goats comes up in scripture I must tell you I don't get it. I don't understand. Because goats are relatively clean, goats are intelligent and goats, as you know, are always on top of everything! *[laughter]*

So today we're pausing to think about what it means to imagine Jesus as a good shepherd. We who are post-Constantinian, who have inherited a tradition of understanding Jesus as God, what is in fact our image of who God is? And as challenging as it sometimes is for us to refer to God with feminine pronouns, we've done it a different way when we've envisioned Jesus sort of as a bearded lady when the idea of a shepherd might be a vigorous young person - male or female, I might add - who is at work saving creatures who are incapable of either cleaning themselves, saving themselves, finding their own food, getting their own refreshment, who are a danger to themselves and others and who are really essentially not very pleasant to be near and who if you are near them will make you smell like lanolin and other body excrements and fluids.

Now the pope gets that one, doesn't he? When he addresses his cardinals and bishops and priests who are called by the Latin title *pastors* (Do you know what the word *pastor* means in Latin? Shepherd!) he says if you are doing your jobs right you will smell like the sheep. You will be close enough to your people to be infected with their dirt, their odor, their cantankerousness, their filth, their needs, and you will be there to help them with that, to save them from that, to offer them an option for their ignorance of food and drink and salvation from underneath the thorn bush from which they cannot extract themselves - as much as they ought to because they got themselves there in the first place.

These are extraordinary adjustments, it seems to me, of the image of God if the 23rd Psalm - which is way pre-Christian - and the Christian concepts of Jesus as a good shepherd are to be taken seriously. What in the world is the shepherd? There are other places in scripture where we read that the shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. It's felt that in scriptural times the sheepfold was a circular sort of stone fence and at night the sheep were herded into that circular area, but there was no gate on it so the shepherd became the gate. He would lie down in the opening to keep the sheep from getting out and the wolves from getting in. That's a pretty dangerous position to be in, especially if sheep are that dumb. They'll walk on you. And we do it all the time, don't we? Walk on our shepherd. And that doesn't change our shepherd's attitude toward us at all because the shepherd understands our situation and our condition, and the shepherd's job is to feed, water, protect, and save us.

We like to have a friendly relationship with Jesus. We like to snuggle up. In fact we probably to some degree or another enjoy being carried on the savior's shoulders. You may notice in those depictions that the shepherd has the front feet held in one hand and the back feet held in the other. If he didn't do that he'd be kicked or the animal would escape even though being brought to safety. We like to enjoy the kind of closeness which accepts our filthiest and most nether parts as acceptable even close to the face of the Creator. We fool ourselves into thinking that that's a good place for us to be. No, we *know* it's a good place for us to be. We somehow think that it's a great place for Jesus' face to be. I don't think so.

And then we like to say, "*He's my shepherd but not yours.*" We like to say, "*We're sheep. We're dirty, we're crummy, we're dumb, we're lost - and you're goats. You're smarter than we are, you're cleaner than we are, you can take us to what we need, but you're outside because we're sheep and the savior saves us, but the savior won't save you because you're a goat.*"

The sheep and the goats got together this week on a Greek island called Lesbos named after the classical poet Lesbia where we get the word *lesbian* because she wrote beautiful love poetry to her lady friends. The pope and the leaders of the Orthodox Church, Bartholomew and Hieronymus, went to a refugee camp where there were people from Afghanistan and Syria and other beleaguered parts of the world. This morning the pope spoke about the sadness and tragedy and need of people and particularly, as is always his case, the young. According to reports I've heard, families came home with him to Rome. He didn't say, "*Do it.*" He said, "*This is how to do it. Here's the example.*" That shepherd smells more and more like his sheep every day. He talked in his little sermon about the hand of God which is made reference to at the end of the gospel lesson today. "*No one will snatch them.*" He's talking about the sheep. "*My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they will follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one.*"

The comparison being made here is that the hand of Jesus, the shepherd who rescues the sheep, is in fact the hand of God doing the work of God which is not aloof or outside of the world and, according to these early depictions, looks nothing like an angry old man on a cloud condemning anybody or anything but a loving, dirty shepherd getting ever more filthy by caring for the flock that has wandered, that is stupid, that is dirty, that is hungry, that is thirsty, and he made the point that was made long before the pope ever got around to it, in John 10 that the service of the shepherd is in fact God's service. Do you see how backward that is to most of religion when we talk about how *we* serve God? When we talk about Jesus as a good shepherd we're looking at the business of how God loves, serves, cares for, saves, feeds, nourishes, waters and retrieves *us!* It's nuts! And then we want to get selfish with it. We want to say, "*This is our God. I'm in, you're out. I'm a sheep, you're a goat.*" But somewhere else in John, same chapter, 16th verse, Jesus says - in my estimation one of the most important sentences in all of scripture - "*And I have other sheep who are not of this fold.*" Can you live with that?

Can you believe that as Jesus' hand was the hand of God that you and I who believe, teach and confess that we are parts of the Body of Christ, that our hands are the hands of Christ and that our fingernails need to be dirty with the smelly manure of the business of service - not to anybody who deserves it because that's not what it's about. When it becomes a matter of desert, then you own God and somebody else doesn't because you've done a better job of making God like you. But when it's a matter of service, when it's a matter of Jesus' hand being God's hand and your hand being Jesus' hand, it's simply a hand that's dirty and clothing that's smelly and the business of serving those who are hungry, those who are lost, those who are thirsty, those who are ensnared in the thorns of life in a fashion that will kill them if they are not helped out, those who are not of this fold.

The 4th century depiction of that young shepherd, it seems to me, is way more powerful because that kid could do the job way better than the person in the bathrobe with the poodles. You know who I want to find me when I'm under the thorn bush. It's the one who can get under there himself and who doesn't mind being dirty and who has a cardboard box in his kitchen for me to hand feed me until I'm strong enough again and who loves every other lost creature as much as me, even those in another fold. You see, religion can be a strong and beautiful business because the image we follow is one of a shepherd, a real one.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.